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Let the Wound Lie Open (John 3. 1-7, 11-16)

Sarah Bachelard

‘When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it, let the wound lie open’. Our gospel reading this week is a mysterious one, but I wonder if these words from our poet-prophet Michael Leunig take us as close as anything to its deep meaning?

Our theme over Lent is repentance. We’ve been exploring how this involves not just being sorry for things we have or haven’t done, but noticing deep habits of attention and patterns of thought that distort our understanding and response. Repentance is to do with *metanoia* – changing, transforming our minds – personally and collectively. And we’ve focused over the past few weeks on ‘thoughts’ ranging from Evagrius’s eight thoughts (pride, anger, vainglory, sloth and so on), to the humanly irresistible ‘thought’ that we are the centre of our own lives, and finally (last week) to our collective cultural habit of thinking of the world and our lives as commodities, resources to be exploited and maximised more than gifts to be enjoyed and shared.

Today’s gospel invites us to consider this theme of *metanoia* at an even deeper level. It’s one thing to notice particular patterns of thought and response, and seek to change them; it is another to repent of the whole mechanism that gives rise to our alienating thoughts in the first place. In this passage in John’s gospel, repentance is being called for – not simply at the level of our thoughts and behaviour, but at the level of our being itself. It’s almost (though this is a risky way of putting it) as though we are asked to *repent* our being. So let me try to say more about this.

What is repentance for? So that we might realise communion with others and with God – so that illusions and blockages that keep us from compassion and truth might be dissolved, so that (in John’s language) we may share in eternal life. How do we repent? Jesus says: ‘No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ (John 3. 3). Nicodemus is frankly puzzled. What do you mean be born ‘differently’? ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ (John 3.4). Jesus goes on: ‘What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above”’ (John 3. 6-7).

The spiritual journey is about the transformation of our identity, our self. It means shifting where our lives are sourced. To be ‘born of the flesh’ is to be sourced in a way of being that is essentially alienated and alienating. This isn’t about flesh as in ‘body’, ‘matter’, but the whole dynamic of human identity formation which is dualistic. I become ‘me’ by defining myself against ‘you’ and the rest of the world; I become a ‘self’ that needs to be protected, promoted or valued over against other selves. Although this is humanly unavoidable (I can become a self no other way), and although I can do many good things from this place, growing in love and compassion – there remains always a limit, a sense of separation, less than full communion. Others are always liable to be apprehended as rivals or threats; God is always other to me.

To be born of the spirit is to be sourced in God’s own life, to *receive* my life rather than have to grasp or establish it. This isn’t about some floaty, ethereal way of being, but what the contemplative tradition calls ‘unitive’ consciousness. It’s about the sense of separateness dropping away, somehow entering into the felt knowledge of our essential union with God and with other people. This can sound abstract – theoretical – but we can see its effect. I think of the story of St Francis embracing the leper – not as an act of charity from a safe distance (good Francis sincerely reaching out to the poor), but as an expression of communion – his felt sense of identity, of

one-ness with everyone. I've mentioned in other reflections Thomas Merton's experience of this too – his sudden realisation one day in a shopping district in Louisville, 'on the corner of Fourth and Walnut', that 'I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.¹

What John's gospel narrates in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus is the deepest meaning of repentance – the call to 'be' differently. Repentance ultimately involves not remaining fixed in dualistic ways of perceiving and being, but coming to share in the communion of God, coming to share the mind of Christ.

But how? How do we shift our consciousness in this way? How are we born from above? Nicodemus is right to insist on its impossibility – we *are* powerless to change our being from the inside out. Any way we go about it is caught up in the very dynamic we want to change – the earnest separate self trying very hard to transcend itself, to let itself go, to do better ... The harder we try, the more tightly we are bound into the way of being we seek to repent. So we need to receive this transformation as a *gift*. We need grace. And here is the extraordinary, counter-intuitive truth – our access to this grace of God is almost always by way of our alienation, by way of the wounds we suffer because of it. In the strange economy of God, the means of death becomes the means of life.

It was like this for ancient Israel, on its long and grumbling Exodus from Egypt. Sick of the hardships of their desert journey, the people speak against Moses and against God: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?' (Numbers 21. 5). Their alienation began to deal them death – the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many died. Then the people come to Moses, acknowledging their 'sin', and asking him to plead on their behalf. 'And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live"' (Numbers 21. 8).

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), 156.

It's in the light of this story, that John understands the healing power of Jesus' crucifixion. Like the serpents, his death is the bitter fruit of human alienation from and resistance to the presence and purposes of God. To look upon Christ crucified is to see our woundedness writ large – to see ourselves as both perpetrators and victims of alienation, sin, violence. And there's something about really seeing this, acknowledging it and being with it that mysteriously opens us to healing from God. We cannot heal, we cannot change ourselves; we can only acknowledge our need. The rest is gift.

Yet notice that discovering this economy of grace offers the possibility of changing how we experience our wounds, our sense of dividedness or limit. These *are* painful, they are sources of suffering ... but like the serpents, like Christ crucified, it is possible to contemplate them, be with them, not simply as problems or signs of something 'wrong' but in ways that lead to deep healing – discovering not merely relief for symptoms, but transformation of the source of our alienation, being liberated from the power of our wounds to deal death. In my own life – and I know for many of you as well – sometimes, it has been in staying with, embracing or undergoing what felt at first almost unendurable, something I just wanted to push away or have fixed, that has been the site of grace – an opening into a new way of being, the next step in the journey from separation to communion, being born from above.

This is *metanoia*, repentance. The Persian poet Rumi wrote: 'the hurt that we embrace becomes joy. Call it to your arms where it can change'. And our own Michael Leunig says it too: 'When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it, let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in, to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it, let a bird lean in the hole and sing; a simple song like a tiny bell, and let it ring'.